

The Ontology of A King
By Min. Dr. Pauline Harris-Lloyd

There can be no doubt, even in the true depth of the most prejudiced mind, that the August 28 March on Washington was the most significant and moving demonstration for freedom and justice in all the history of this country.

As a social scientist, I examine the effect of social constructs and economic systems on human interaction and states of being. To fully appreciate human behavior, both past and present, I rely upon primary source documents that not only inform my perspective but also provide a theoretical framework for transliterating historic text and events into modern applications.

Called a rabble-rouser by the FBI, revered by community members, and honored as a civil rights icon by a nation, the speech that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave on August 28, 1963, at the March on Washington was the largest dissertation presentation in history. With over 250,000 people in attendance, 3,000 press members, and a national broadcast audience, King presented what was the essence of his dissertation, which question the ontology of man. Drawing upon the ontological interpretation of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman, King postulated that the fundamental starting point for human ontology is the correlation that we have with the world; therefore, 'being' human is the way in which we encounter the world [1].

Man experiences himself as having a world to which he belongs, and it is from the analysis of this polar relationship between man and the world that the basic ontological structure is derived.

The first foundation for King's ontological structure, which resonated in his speech in Washington, is the duplicity of being raised in a strong family and supportive community while encountering a world of socially constructed racial[2] disparities. Early on, King's mother taught him that segregation was a social condition and not a natural order. His father was a respected minister, activist, and NAACP President[3]. In his autobiography, King says of his heritage, "I learned to abhor segregation, considering it both rationally

inexplicable and morally unjustifiable. My mother had no idea that the little boy in her arms would years later be involved in a struggle against a system that she was speaking of [4]."

Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chair of hate and evil.

The second foundation of King's ontological structure occurred in Maple Shade, New Jersey on June 11, 1950. King, Walter McCall, Pearl Smith, and Doris Wilson entered Mary Café in Maple Shade, NJ. The owner, Ernest Nichols, refused to serve the group and ordered them to leave the establishment. The group remained in their seats as an act of non-violent resistance. Nichols left, returned with a gun, and began firing. King and the others escaped unharmed and attempted to report the incident to the Maple Shade police department, which refused to file a report. The Camden NAACP intervened, and the Maple Shade police department charged Nichols with firearms violations; however, the racial discrimination charges were dismissed. King referred to this incident as a formative step in his commitment to a more just society.

As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute.

The third foundation of King's ontological structure was the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) on December 5, 1955, when members of Holt Street Baptist Church appointed King as President, and again on February 14, 1957 when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Atlanta's Civil Rights Community appointed him Executive Director. As the leader of the MIA and SCLC, King organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955 to 1956), delivered his first national address at the Lincoln Memorial (1957), held conferences with Presidents on Civil Rights legislation (1957-1960), published his first book, survived an attempted assassination (1958), and responded to Jewish and Christian leaders regarding his civil disobedience and non-violent activism (1963).

When you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

The final foundation of King's ontological structure, the fulfillment of his commitment to leave an absolute, eternal, and indelible impact on this nation, and his resignation that America did not share his perspective on Black ontology, were the events of 1963. In 1963, King penned the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (April), faced Alabama's public safety commissioner and ardent segregationist Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor's fire hoses and police dogs (May), gave the keynote address at the March on Washington urging jobs and freedom (August), delivered the eulogy of Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, and Cynthia Dianne Wesley, three of the four children killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing (September)[\[1\]](#), and became the FBI's 'public enemy number one' at the authorization of Robert Kennedy (October). King also published a collection of sermons entitled *Strength to Love* (June) all before his last child born on March 28, 1963, was 7 months old.

Over the next four years, King would receive the Noble Peace Prize, meet with Malcolm X and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, speak out against the Vietnam War, encounter white segregationists in Selma, Alabama in what is known as Bloody Sunday, endure increasing FBI scrutiny, while organizing a Poor People's Campaign to end American poverty.

A comparative analysis of King's dissertation, the speech given at the March on Washington (aka, *I Have A Dream*), and the speech given at the Mason Temple in Memphis (aka, *I've Been to the Mountain Top*) revealed an ontological theme of addressing the condition of Black Americans existing within systems of economic, political, and social disenfranchisement. His dissertation made an argument in support of affirmative Black ontology; the speech on Washington presented his dissertation in which he envisioned a world in which Black people were free to just be, and his speech in Memphis, one day before his assassination, was an acknowledgment and final resolve that a Black existence, free of oppressive systems, may come after his death.

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. We refuse to believe that the bank of

justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a profoundly complex and complicated visionary whose message of establishing social, political, and economic structures that affirmed poor and historically marginalized communities was far ahead of its time.

As citizens of the state of New Jersey, where King's activism began, and members of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, we are uniquely positioned to effect lasting change. So, let us not minimize King or his life to palatable and decontextualized speech extractions which he wrote from places of deep personal pain and sacrifice and that were articulated in centers of power and influence. Let us do the deep and challenging work of examining tacit and explicit presuppositions and biases that can be embedded in institutional practices, policies, and procedures. Let us be intentional in creating ontological workspaces and equitable salaries so that people not only exist, but encounter a work environment where they are free, where they belong, and where they thrive.

Resources

^[1] Chapter three of King's dissertation <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/chapter-iii-comparison-conceptions-god-thinking-paul-tillich-and-henry-nelson>.

^[2] America's social ontology is rooted in the artificial construct of race. Personally, I do not believe in the concept of race; however, I use the term since America's economic, political, and social structures are understood and communicated along racial lines.

^[3] King's father, Martin Sr., led an Atlanta bus boycott, fought for teacher pay equality, and desegregated elevators in the city courthouses.

^[4] Carson, C. (editor, 1998). *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Grand Central Publications, New York.

^[1] The fourth victim of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, Carole Robinson, was eulogized at a separate service.